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Maryknoll Memories and Managua

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As the vise of Sandinista persecution continues to tighten around Miguel Cardinal Obando y Bravo of Managua, some people may be reminded of another patriotic churchman who was victimized by the adherents of Marxism-Leninism: the late Josef Cardinal Mindszenty of Hungary. But a more striking analogy may be found closer to home, in one of the great figures of 20th-century American Catholicism.

On March 18, 1960, the Intermediate People's Court in Shanghai, China, met to pass judgment on an American Catholic bishop who was not even allowed to be present at his "trial" and sentencing; he was represented by an empty, wooden chair. The bishop was charged with being a "dangerous, veteran United States imperialist spy" who had "personally directed the counterrevolutionary activities" of a "traitorous clique" that had tried to "undermine" the successes of the people's revolution. Bishop James Edward Walsh had previously been accused of sabotaging the government's approved "independent church"; his own ministry was described by the regime as a "prominent anti-communist stronghold against the people."

For this, Bishop Walsh, then 68 years old, was sentenced to 20 years in prison. He finally was released in July 1970, and died in New York in 1981 at age 89.

The bishop, once described by Richard Cardinal Cushing of Boston as "the finest missionary to go forth from America in my lifetime," was one of the founding members of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, the Maryknoll Order, and had served as its superior general from 1936 to 1946.

The false charges against Bishop Walsh of Maryknoll are very similar to those regularly pressed against Cardinal Obando y Bravo by the Sandinista government. The irony is that the falsehoods against the cardinal are being spread not by a kangaroo court in Shanghai, but by the foreign minister of Nicaragua, Miguel d'Escoto, who is himself a member of Maryknoll.

How this fantastic inversion of history came about is a tale for another time. What deserves immediate attention is the single-mindedness with which Marxist-Leninist regimes—be they Hungarian, Chinese or Nicaraguan—work to crush the independence of the Catholic Church. The pattern is strikingly similar in these three examples.

In the aftermath of revolution, strategies of co-optation and outright persecution are mixed with great tactical cleverness. A "people's church" (or front organization such as the Czechoslovakian "Pacem in Terris") is blessed by the new regime as an "alternative" to the reactionary church aligned with Rome. This is then trumpeted

to the world (and especially to the West) as evidence of religious liberty under a communist regime. Those who decline to join the new church or front organization are, *prima facie*, counterrevolutionaries. Their persecution can then be justified as a defense of the people's revolutionary achievement.

The impact of world-wide public opinion will probably rule out a show trial of Cardinal Obando y Bravo on the Mindszenty or Walsh models—at least until the Nicaraguan democratic resistance has been eliminated. But should the Sandinista consolidation of power in Nicaragua become complete, there is little doubt that the cardinal's fate would be the same as that of Bishop Walsh.

Persecution of the Catholic Church by Marxist-Leninists is a constant of our times; only the cast of persecutors changes. It is Cardinal Obando y Bravo—not Miguel d'Escoto, and not those Maryknoll nuns who have, for whatever reasons of confused compassion, systematically misled House Speaker Tip O'Neill about the realities of Nicaragua—who truly represents the heritage of Maryknoll and Bishop Walsh.

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